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INFO RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 7188  
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RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT PRIORITY 8126  
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0681

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000750

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG - LAWRENCE, NEA/FO, NEA/PI  
LONDON FOR TSOU  
PARIS FOR ZEYA  
ROME FOR ROSE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/29/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [KMPI](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA QUARTERLY REPORT

REF: A. TUNIS 667

- [1](#)B. TUNIS 644
- [1](#)C. TUNIS 622
- [1](#)D. TUNIS 584
- [1](#)E. TUNIS 501
- [1](#)F. 03/01/2006 ERELI STATEMENT
- [1](#)G. TUNIS 425
- [1](#)H. TUNIS 387
- [1](#)I. TUNIS 311
- [1](#)J. TUNIS 299
- [1](#)K. TUNIS 227

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM HUDSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: This quarter was marked by significant USG engagement of the GOT, including visits by SecDef Rumsfeld and NEA A/S Welch. The GOT took some positive steps towards increased political reform, including pardoning approximately eighty prisoners described as political prisoners by human rights groups. Activism by Tunisian reformists has continued, but its efficacy is limited by the GOT's strict domestic control. The status of human rights and democracy remains behind our Freedom Agenda targets and requires increased and sustained USG pressure to advance our reform goals. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) HIGH LEVEL ENGAGEMENT: The highest levels of the USG raised the Freedom Agenda with GOT officials and private Tunisians during this quarter. During Secretary Rumsfeld's February 11 visit to Tunisia, he noted the importance of democratic reform. In a short statement after his meeting with the Minister of Defense, Rumsfeld said "political and economic freedom go hand in hand." On March 1, the Deputy Spokesman released a statement praising the GOT release of political prisoners and encouraging greater reform (Ref F). During his March 15 visit to Tunisia, A/S Welch reinforced USG expectations for political reform in Tunisia with a variety of GOT and private interlocutors, including President Ben Ali (Ref B), and in a press conference.

[1](#)3. (C) GOT PROGRESS: In the first quarter of 2006, the GOT did take some positive steps towards increased political reform. Most notably, President Ben Ali, for the first time with an American official, suggested to SecDef that he would one day be a "retired" president (Ref I). In advance of Tunisia's fiftieth anniversary of independence, Ben Ali pardoned or granted conditional release to over 1600 prisoners, including over eighty described as political

prisoners by local and international NGOs (Ref G). The International Committee of the Red Cross head of delegation also reported continuing good cooperation with GOT authorities on improving prison conditions. On March 3, a new political party, the Green Party for Progress, was registered, bringing the number of Tunisian opposition parties to eight. While the registration of new political parties is one of our Freedom Agenda goals, there is no evidence this party will play an active role in the opposition (Ref D). Announced changes to the prior review (deport legal) process for print media were ratified in January (Ref K). There is also a palpable, if cautious, trend toward more critical press coverage of local social issues, although journalists are unconvinced true freedom of expression is growing. In mid-March, a GOT-controlled newspaper suggested new print media would appear in the near future. These positive actions are significant since they include four of the seven political reform targets former A/S Craner raised with the GOT in 2004.

¶4. (C) GOT RECALCITRANCE: Despite these small positive steps, the GOT has also maintained many of its status quo positions on civil society. Harassment of activists (septel) continues, including press defamation campaigns, and GOT officials also publicly denounced many activists as "traitors" (Ref C). The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) continues to face a court case brought by GOT loyalists to try to reduce the group's activism (Ref E).

¶5. (C) CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM: The 18 October Committee, a disparate alliance of activists and politicians, including leftists, independents and Islamists, continued to be publicly active, although the GOT banned participation in press conferences and demonstrations organized by the group in 2006 (Refs H and A). The General Union of Tunisian Workers complained that GOT control restricted press coverage of its sixtieth anniversary (Ref J).

¶6. (C) OUTLOOK: Tunisia remains behind the curve when it comes to Freedom Agenda goals. While the GOT may take steps that give the appearance of a commitment to democracy (like those in para 3), there is no evidence that there is any willingness to increase political space or discourse in a meaningful way in the near term. With major legislative and presidential elections scheduled for the fall of 2009, clear and strong pressure must be continuously applied to the GOT if the Tunisian populace is to be engaged in the political process by 2009.  
HUDSON